A Child's Story of American Literature

CHAPTER I.
In the Days of Priscilla and Pocahontas.

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I.

TOPSY, the little colored girl in "Uncle Tom's Cabin," said she never was "borned," she just "growed." Our American literature was precisely the opposite. It was born. All the other literatures of the world, the English and the French, the Latin and the Greek, were the ones that just grew. They grew out of folk tales and folk songs composed by word of mouth and told by one generation to the next until writing was invented and they were set down by people to read. These stories and songs, too, were all of heroes who did marvelous and magical things, from whom people liked to feel they had taken their beginning. But in our first books there were no tales of dragons and mighty men slaying them. They are not stories of romantic fancy but records of hard facts. They were written by men who came across the sea to fight for a foothold along the coast of a hitherto unknown country and here, ax in hand and gun beside them, they built up struggling colonies among the Indians in the wilderness.

But perhaps it would be better to say that our literature was born grown up. For in another way its beginning differed from the beginnings of other literature. The men who made it were not simple people slowly emerging from barbarism. They were highly civilized and they had just come from a country where were living at that moment some of the greatest writers of all history. The ships that carried the first immigrants to America carried more other people of the highest education than could perhaps have been found in any groups of the same size and makeup at home in England.

But they carried no persons who felt the need of expressing themselves in books. Books were written and written surprisingly soon, but they were written not for their own sake—which is the way what we call great literature is written—but for the sake of something else. The immigrants were of the same stock as those who were producing at that time great plays and great poems; but the people who had the talent and the desire to produce these naturally stayed at home. One does not go to a savage wilderness to write. John Milton was a Puritan, and the same motives that brought the other Puritans to America might well have brought him too—as indeed they came near bringing Oliver Cromwell himself, for he was about to come with his friend Winthrop when he was prevented. But had Milton, with all his genius, come to New England, we can be sure that we should have had no "Paradise Lost." For there were too many practical needs and hardships in the wilderness to occupy and distract him.

II.

At the time these first immigrants came England was on the threshold of her great civil war, which ended in the execution of the King and in the rule of the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell. It was a war between the cavaliers and the roundheads; that is, between the royalists, who wanted the King and the established church, and the Puritans, who wanted to set up a church of their own, one separate from the State. The early ships to America brought men of both kinds. The royalists came first, and to Virginia. The Puritans came a little later, and to Massachusetts. But while the Puritans had left home to secure a liberty they could not find elsewhere, the royalists came only to seek their fortunes in a land supposed to be full of gold. So the royalists for the most part intended to return when they had filled their pockets, but the Puritans intended to stay. As they differed in their intentions, so they differed in their natures. The royalists were, of course, undemocratic in their notions, and they were light hearted and pleasure seeking; the Puritans were democratic, sober minded, pleasure fearing.

But though so widely differing in their natures and their aims, they were precisely alike in one respect—neither shipload intended to budge one inch from its ideals or allow any one else to do so. In Virginia, more than fifty years after the first landing, the Governor wrote home: "I thank God there are in Virginia no free schools nor printing, and I hope we shall not have, for learning hath brought disobedience and heresy and sects into the world, and printing hath divulged them." As far as the lack of schools and printing went, the nature of the settlement had done as much as this intolerant spirit to prevent them, for the houses and plantations were scattered, and there was no town or village life in Virginia. The New Englanders, on the other hand, established schools almost as soon as they had built themselves huts and churches, for they were not only democratic but they believed that each man should know enough to read the Bible and work out his own salvation. Rhode Island was the only colony that did not compel the education of children. "Unless schools and colleges flourish," thundered one of the Puritan leaders, "the church and State cannot live!" Every town of fifty families must provide a common school; of one hundred families, a grammar school also. Four years after it was established the Bay Colony gave over one-half of its entire annual income to found the school which two years later became Harvard College. It was the first time in all history that a body of people voted its own money to found a place of education. Yet, no more than the Virginians, did they propose to have any ideas in the colony which were not their own.

Although they had come to America for liberty of thought and because they disagreed with the established church at home they expelled Roger Williams to Rhode Island for thinking his own way and affirming that there should not be any national church. It was the same with the printing press. Though they set up one at Harvard, for a quarter of a century its output was entirely controled by the president, and when he permitted the publication of certain books which tended "to open the doors to heresy" they appointed two licensers without whose consent no books could be printed and allowed no other press in the colony. To them any change whatever opened the doors to heresy. One of the books which had called down their wrath was only a protest against the nauseous but absurd medicines then in fashion. It was "A most desperate booke written against the taking of physick," and the clergy promptly ordered it to be burned.

But the intolerance of neither colony had anything to do with the first books written, for they were taken back in manuscript and printed in England. Both of them were written by men of the Virginia Colony, and hardly anything else of importance was written there until the days of the Revolution, more than a hundred and fifty years after. This may have been chiefly because of the lack of printing presses and because the population was so scattered. If you had been born in Virginia during all this time you could not have gone to school at all unless your father was rich enough to have school come to you, in the shape of a private tutor. If this was the case, then you could have gone to a college which only gentlemen's sons attended. But in spite of the common lack of education the Southern provinces supplied, in Revolutionary times, the best of the statesmen, orators and Generals. So, during this long rest from literary production, Virginia was breeding a race of men who were learning how to mix with men.

III.

Both of these books are in the nature of reports written for the people at home. The second one must have come to the attention of a man whom the world now looks upon as the principal person in England then and since. Its account of a real voyage and shipwreck must certainly have given Shakespeare some ideas for "The Tempest," the last of his long series of plays. The earlier book is the one which gives us 1607 as the exact date for the birth of our literature. It was written by Capt. John Smith, who may himself have known Shakespeare as he had written a play in London before he joined the expedition. It would be wrong, however, to say that the first American book was written by an American. For although the "True Relation of Virginia" was written by this busy man during the first thirteen months of his stay about events that took place under his eyes, he did not stay long.

Capt. John Smith was a soldier of fortune. Though only 27 he had already lived a life as full of dashing and romantic adventure as that of a motion picture hero. On his travels through Europe he had had as many hair breadth escapes as would make breathless endings to a dozen episodes in one of those pictures which are artfully continued from week to week. He had been cast overboard at sea, he had been rescued from the Bashaw of Tartary, he had been the favorite of a princess at Constantinople; and he had returned to England from hewing his way through the world with his sword, just in time to cast his lot with other gentlemen adventurers about to sail for Virginia in search of fabulous riches. Instead, he had to busy himself when he got there in building forts and palisades and in planting. But he found time to explore the regions inland. Sometimes he was the guest and sometimes the captive of the Indians. And it is by a story he tells on one of these occasions that, oddly enough, the days of the pioneers are most widely remembered. In this book he mentions being captured and taken before a friendly Indian chief named Powhatan, whose daughter, a mere child, was called Pocahontas. Considerably later this Pocahontas married one of the settlers and was taken by him back to England, where she attracted much attention. At this time Smith was living in London in poverty and obscurity, and he wrote a letter to Queen Anne in which he mentions for the first time that this "Indian Princess" had saved his life, although in his book she had been a mere child and her father had treated him in a very friendly fashion. So it looks as if Capt. John were telling a tall story merely to connect his name with a person who was being much talked about. For the captain, brave and competent as he was, resembled a movie hero in another respect—he could not bear to stay long out of the limelight.

But what if the most frequently remembered story of the time of our colonization is not true! There are plenty of others just as thrilling which are. And that story was really not written in an American book anyway. Sober John Bradford, who went over in one of the next ship loads to the Northern colony and afterward became its Governor and died there instead of in London, also wrote a history of what he saw and did. He does not speak of Indian emperors and princesses, but of wretched wigwams where savages were dying with smallpox. It only goes to show that Capt. John Smith was the first of a long series of English visitors who for two hundred and fifty years were to rewrite their impressions when they got back home and exaggerate their American experiences.

Carroll on Poets

MEMOIRS OF THE MEMORABLE. By Sir James Denham. George H. Doran Company.

STATESMEN and poets, as well as those whose claim to distinction rests solely upon inherited titles, cross and recross the stage in the course of Sir James Denham's "Memoirs of the Memorable." Sir James as an undergraduate at Oxford had as tutor the author of "Alice in Wonderland." All the world knows with what furious distaste Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, the Oxford Don, regarded any remark or printed paragraph linking him with the works of "Lewis Carroll." Dodgson's dislike for the mellower forms of writing extended to the poets. He was informed that his pupil, Denham, was endeavoring to edge up to the Muses. Says the author of "Memoirs of the Memorable": "He nearly had a fit, and told me that he felt pains and spasms for days. He said that for one man that the poets had saved there were millions they had damned, and that, moreover, if there were any young imbecile inclined to be an ass he was certain to be a young poet."

"This cheerful counsel remained with me," continues Sir James Denham, "and I made a resolution that I would never knowingly put myself in the way to meet the Muse, but that if the maiden came out of her way to conciliate me I would take her to my bosom. That was but human. This afterward happened, and, singing as she bade me, the stave fell into the hands of Lewis Carroll. To my wonder, he was delighted and prophesied such things for it, which have mostly been fulfilled, as the poem still lives.